

HEALTH

New Types of Vessel Problems Following Shingles

In some adults experiencing shingles, the virus responsible will replicate itself and accumulate in the blood vessels of the brain, leading to a stroke. Consequently, patients who suffer a stroke as a result of the varicella zoster virus need to receive antiviral medication to treat the infection. Although most doctors may be aware of the standard symptoms of strokes caused by this virus, a new study describes two cases in which patients first developed the warning signs of stroke months after they developed shingles, a much longer time interval than usual.

These findings suggest that even when patients develop problems in their blood vessels months after having shingles, doctors need to "think about varicella zoster virus," lead author Dr. Donald H. Gilden told Reuters Health. Varicella zoster virus also causes chickenpox in children. Consequently, all adults who developed chickenpox as a child carry the virus in their nerve cells. The virus remains dormant unless it is reactivated decades later, causing shingles, a painful rash that typically strikes after the age of 60.

In some adults who develop shingles, the virus will accumulate in the arteries of the brain, possibly reducing blood flow to the brain and putting people at risk of having a stroke. In the November 7th issue of The New England Journal of Medicine, Gilden and his colleagues present the histories of two patients who developed an unusual type of blood vessel problem following a bout of shingles, highlighting the need for doctors to keep an open mind when treating similar patients. In both cases, the patients showed early signs of stroke - such as numbness in limbs and loss of vision - around 6 months after they developed shingles, a much longer time interval than normally observed.

In addition, Gilden explained that one patient developed shingles around the buttocks, but also experienced signs of a stroke, indicating that the virus was also acting on blood vessels in the brain. The researcher said he suspected that the virus had reactivated in two places in the body at once, in order to cause symptoms in two widely separated places. Both patients received infusions of antiviral medication, and both recovered shortly after, the report indicates.

Based on these findings, Gilden said he hopes that doctors realize that virally induced strokes can occur even months after the virus appears, and the presence of viral DNA in spinal fluid is not necessary to determine if the patient is carrying the virus. He added that these unusual cases demonstrate that a stroke can still stem from the virus even if shingles appear in a body region far from the brain.

SOURCE: The New England Journal of Medicine 2002;347:1500-1503.



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